

Case report

OVERKILL MATRICIDE: AN UNUSUAL AND STINGING CASE REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Matricide has always been considered one of the most aberrant crimes that can be committed; although known in mythology, it is among the rarest crimes and rarely reported in the literature, for this reason it has been difficult to accumulate sufficient information to determine specific mechanisms and motivations. We present the case of a 73-year-old woman who was killed with extreme violence by her 38-year-old adopted son who had never received treatment for schizophrenia or other psychological disorders. The case can be classified as "overkill", defined as the application to the victim of an action that is excessively harmful in terms of force and ferocity compared to the one necessary to cause death. Of particular interest was the discovery of pins and tailor's needles stuck in the face of the victim. In the unusual case here reported, describing singular method of homicidal action, the crime scene and autopsy results were evaluated along with other relevant data available in the literature.

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1. Introduction

Matricide is a particularly rare crime, reported in literature, to be between 1 and 4 percent, averaged under 2 percent [1-5]; percentages decrease if the victims involved are adoptive mothers [6]. A correlation with psychiatric disorders was found in many cases, to the extent that matricide is defined as a "schizophrenic crime". This correlation also explains the heinousness with which matricides are committed, defining the crime as gory as "overkill" [3]; indeed, cases in which psychiatric pathologies of the murderer were known have been reported less frequently. In this context we present an unusual and singular case of matricide, in the absence of childhood psychiatric problems.

2. Case report

A 73-year-old woman was found dead in her own home by the police.

The police intervened because they were alerted by a neighbor who had heard the woman scream and ask for help.

At the scene there was a young man who, armed with a kitchen knife, attacked the operators, and claimed to be the elderly woman's adopted son.

The corpse was found supine surrounded by bloodstains (fig. 1A and B) and with several needles stuck into the face (fig. 1D).

The external inspection showed the presence of ecchymotic-excoriated injuries, together with lacerated-concussive wounds, diffusely distributed on the face (fig. 2A and 2B); of particular interest was the finding of four tailor's pins inserted in the left zygomatic-malar region and one on the left cheek (fig. 2A black arrows); furthermore, a sewing needle was found inserted in the left eye, with thread inserted in the eye (fig. 2B black arrows). Multiple fractures of maxillofacial structures (nasion, maxillary, mandibular and orbital floor) were detected (Fig. 2C and 2D).

On the anterior surface of the neck there were also ecchymotic areas consistent with a throttling attempt (Fig. 2E and 2F).

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Bruised lacerated wounds were also found on the dorsal surface of the fingers and other ecchymosis on the dorsal surface of the left forearm, probably related to defensive attempts. Autopsy revealed an extended cerebral hemorrhage, involving subcortical, subleptomeningeal and intraparenchymal tissues (fig. 3A), in the absence of obvious fractures of the external skull plate. Hemopericardium, related to laceration of the right ventricle (3B and 3C), and multiple and bilateral rib fractures, precisely from 3rd to 8th on the left and from 4th to 8th on the right, were found. Histological examination confirmed the autopsy finding of massive cerebral hemorrhage; the lungs showed a picture of oedema associated with areas of atelectasis alternating with emphysematous areas; hemorrhagic flows were evident in the large bronchi. Toxicological investigations, carried out on blood and vitreous humor samples, were negative for alcohol and the most common substances of abuse.

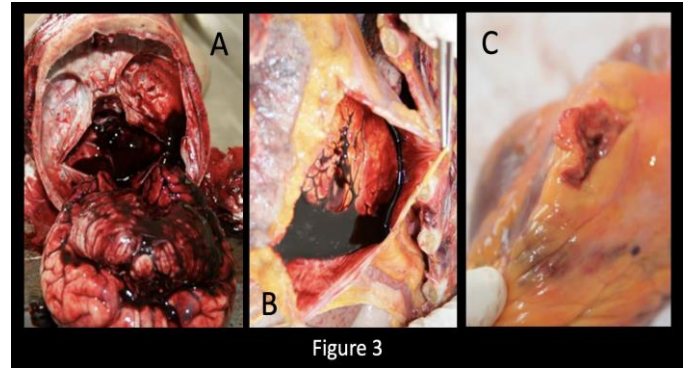


Figure 3. Subcortical and sub-leptomeningeal hemorrhage (A); hemopericardium and right ventricle laceration (B and C).



Figure 1. Crime scene: woman's body lying on the floor covered with damaged furnishings (A); corpse surrounded by bloodstains (B); detail of the pin holder (C); needles stuck to the face (D).

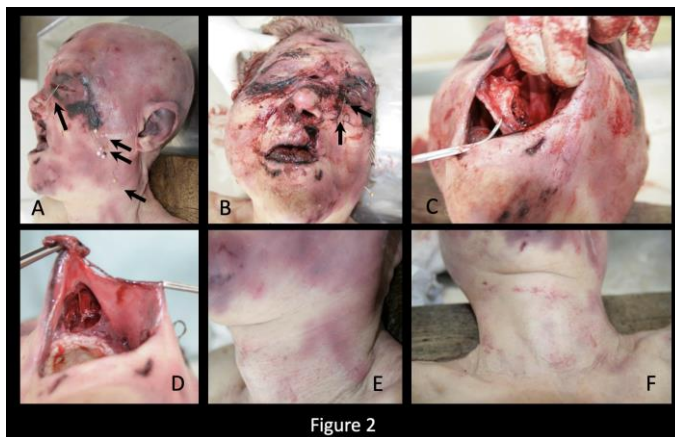


Figure 2. External inspection: diffuse ecchymotic-excoriated injuries and lacerated-convulsive wounds on the face); together with four tailor's pins inserted in the left zygomatic-malar region and one on the left cheek (A and B black arrows); multiple fractures of maxillafacial structures (nasion, maxillary, mandibular and orbital floor) (C and D); ecchymotic areas on the anterior surface of the neck (E and F).

3. Discussion

From an epidemiological and statistical point of view, the case here reported reflects what has been described in the literature: as many authors have pointed out, matricide is carried out more frequently by sons than by daughters [1-4,6,7].

Compared to 'classical matricides', in cases in which adoptive mothers are murdered usually there was a higher percentage of responsible daughters [6], as perpetrators of the crime, in contrast to our case report. It should be emphasized that adoptive mothers, as argued by Heide et al., have a higher risk of aggression because they are considered 'not really relatives'. In analogy to the literature data the age of the mother is usually between 40 and 80 years, instead the age of the son at the time of the homicide ranges from 15 to 50 years [1-7], although Heide pointed out a lower age of victim and aggressor.

Many authors analyzed the way the crime was committed: although the type of weapon used for killing mainly depends on its presence and "availability" at the time of the murder, as suggested by Wick et al., the most used methods are stabbing and natural means of offence [1-3,7,9]. According to Catanesi et al. the most frequently observed mechanism in matricide cases is suffocation, followed by the use of blunt objects, firearms, blunt weapons and last, precipitation. In 2013, Heide et al. reported a substantial overlap between the methods performed in the murders of birthmothers and the ones used in the killing of adoptive mothers, with the use of blunt weapons prevailing in the former cases and the use of firearms in the latter cases. In the case report, the contused, excoriated wounds found in the head-neck areas would be compatible with the statements of many authors about the prevailing mode of aggression in matricides, i.e. blunt instruments and asphyxial mechanisms [1-2,5,7].

On the other hand, Heide reports the most commonly performed method in adoptive mothers' murders is the use of firearms. In the case shown here, in fact, the death was caused by the contusive action of a hard blunt instrument and natural means of attack (hands). The ecchymosis found in the neck and the corresponding hemorrhagic infiltration of the subcutaneous-muscular tissues also suggested an attempt to throttle. The bilateral rib fractures and the laceration of the right ventricle would be attributable to the anteroposterior compression of the thorax, exerted by the aggressor straddling the victim.

The additional lesions on the upper limbs would represent defensive injuries. In relation to the anatomical location of the wounds, Karakasi et al. pointed out that in 65.19% of the cases the injury involved the head, in 48.73% the extremities and in 37.97% the thorax, emphasizing also that the exclusive involvement of the head-neck district, as in the case here described, is indicative of an affective relationship between victim and aggressor.

Therefore, as confirmed by literature, our case-report can be counted within the so-called "overkill", meaning the application of an excessive injurious action in terms of force and ferocity compared to that necessary to cause death [1,3,5,7-8,11]. In this context, the insertion of pins into the mother's face, although less striking, can be likened to the much bloodier cases of decapitation and dismemberment described in the literature [2-3]. In addition, although matricide cases have been reported in the literature in which the victim's capacity for vigilance and defense had been altered through the administration of substances of abuse or psychotropic drugs, in the present case no substance was found in the bloodstream at the time of death [5-8,10]. Analyzing the psychodynamic aspects, the here described matricide is similar to other cases reported in the literature, in which the matricide is depicted as single, young, unemployed, socially isolated, and in conflict with the mother [1,2,5,8]. In fact, it was highlighted that most of the perpetrators defined the mother figure as cumbersome and domineering.

In this case report, the relationship with the mother became conflictual after the son discovered he was adopted; then the relationship would later degenerate into frequent quarrels over continuous financial demands. According to the literature, matricide, especially with the connotations of overkill, is also known to be related to a known psychiatric picture of the offender, identified especially in schizophrenia, but also in depressive, schizoaffective and personality disorders [1-4,5,7], correlated with a higher risk of matricide [4]. However, the particular case here described shows the absence of known psychiatric disorders, thus falling into an even rarer category of matricides [1,4].

The information acquired by Judicial authority put in evidence a past of abuse by the mother, representing a circumstance presented by many authors as triggering factors for the crime [1,4,5,7-10]: in the case described, the mother used to punish her adopted son by sticking pins in him, a punishment that was reproduced on the woman's corpse and was already found during the investigation. Thus, in light of the most common observations in the literature, it is possible to frame this case of matricide with overkill as an expression of an attempt to 'break' the 'pathological bond' between mother and son.

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